1971: Atrocities against Women
Activism, Debates and Dilemmas within the Women’s Movement of Bangladesh

Ayesha Banu
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Foreword

As I went through this truly absorbing research on 1971: Atrocities against Women by Dr. Ayesha Banu, my own memories of the early post Liberation period flitted through my mind in cinematic flashbacks. I therefore cannot help but dwell on these a little. I was in my early teens and had just lost my father in the most traumatic event imaginable – a genocide. After his execution by Pakistan Armed Forces in the first hours of the Army crackdown on 25th March 1971, my mother and I were seeking refuge with friends in Dhaka city often taking up false identities to prevent us from being recognized as Hindus and as family of the executed. Towards the end of the 9 month long period of living in almost captivity we began to hear of women being taken by soldiers as sexual slaves. My mother feared for my safety and at the very hint of danger she swooped me away to another safe haven which she negotiated with friends and acquaintances. After Liberation, my mother and I had to start a new life together without my father and in a new state. One morning I saw my mother being called off to a meeting and on her return she told me that her name had been suggested by the Government to become a member of the Nari Punorbashon Kendra (Women’s Rehabilitation Centre) housed in Dhanmondi the one which Ayesha Banu in this report said was headed by Nilima Ibrahim and run by Moshfeqa Mahmud.

Many have been the afternoons when I heard my mother dejectedly come home and tell me of the stories of the girls who were turned away by their families, those who refused to let go of the babies they gave birth to, those who disowned their babies, those who aspired to become electricians instead of training to be seamstresses. But I too feel remorseful just like the later day feminists that Ayesha speaks of in her research, on not recording these talks with my mother, of not taking up a pen and paper and inquiring more about these details of how the home was run. There
were many times that I had visited the home, danced in cultural functions and participated in picnics with the women. Some of them became quite fond of me, mostly because they were fond of my mother. Yet I never thought of writing about them. They were a part of my living reality. Even when the Ain O Salish Kendra started its research on women’s perspectives of 1971 that was published as “Narir Ekattor”, I was part of the editorial team but could not make myself to be an active researcher. Somehow it was still too close to me and the distance needed for objectification of the research subject was not there. So when after all these years I read a paper that is well researched is empathic as well as being evidence-based and delves in depth into the subject I feel both relieved as well blessed to be reading.

Dr. Ayesha Banu’s work of course relies a lot on the in-depth work that preceded her especially those of Nayanika Mookherjee and Bina D’Costa’s seminal doctoral dissertations in this area. But the special focus of this research paper is that it tries to link itself with the debates and discourses of rape, war babies and violence against women with the women’s movements of the times as well as the later years. Ayeha does this through a series of in-depth interviews with those at the helm of the women’s movement and by immersing herself in their thoughts and feelings. The study captures both the internal dynamics of the domestic national space of the times, as well as it foregrounds the theoretical transformation that took place globally with the Bosnian War, the Beijing Declaration that influenced women’s thinking on these issues worldwide as it did within the Bangladesh women’s movement.

Future generation of scholars, teachers and students will be grateful that this research paper was written at this critical time when women continue to face violence in their everyday lives in stark and varied forms and seek continuously to struggle against it. The atrocities against women in 1971 are the cross we have to bear as
well as the lessons that we have to revisit time and again in our everyday lives. *Birangonas* or war heroines of 1971 are our icons whose lived realities shape our histories, legacies and thought patterns even today, because it is through their lived experience of the state and society that we learn to relive our own lives in criticality and compassion. Such an experiential basis is what makes Bangladesh unique in global outlook and engagement. Future generations will continue to learn from it as Bangladeshis and as world citizens. What richer possessions can we think of passing onto our future generations?

My heartfelt thanks go to Ayesha Banu and to the Centre for Genocide Studies for actualizing this gift for the generations yet to come.

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About the Author

Ayesha Banu is currently teaching as a professor at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. She was awarded PhD degree on Bangladesh Women’s Movement from the University of Dhaka in 2015. She received her first Masters in Sociology (1987), University of Dhaka, while her second Masters as a commonwealth scholar (1993-4) was obtained from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, UK. She started her career as a researcher at the Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in 1989, worked in Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) during 1998-2000. She has been teaching at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka since 2001, and as a part-time faculty in BRAC (2012-14) and Population Sciences, Dhaka University (2010-). She is involved in gender training as a resource person for graduate and undergraduate students, government officials, policy makers, women’s organisations and participants of certificate courses offered by various organisations and universities. She has the institutional affiliation with Central Women’s University, Hatkhola, as a member of Academic Council, Dhaka, Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, Human Development Foundation (HDF), Dhaka. Her areas of interest cover women’s movement, methodological issues, poverty and livelihood, women and religion, body and sexuality, gender and development.
I
Introduction

This paper tries to locate the debates and dilemmas within the women’s movement rotating around the War of Liberation (WoL henceforth) and women. Particular emphasis is placed here on atrocities committed against women and responses from the women’s movement towards the issue during and after the War in 1971. Many of us do know what has happened in 1971, many of us don’t. This is not only about what has taken place, but beyond. This is a story about remembrance and forgetfulness, of engagement and disengagement, going back and coming forth, nearly four decades later, looking at the reflections which have changed over the years. Time has smoothed out the sharp edges while unknown nooks and corners have emerged with unexpected bleakness and despair. This is a story-- narrating the inner dynamics of the women’s movement and the War of Liberation only through the voices of a selected few. In the process of search and research, while revisiting the ground of gendered violence, the ‘few’ becomes large and the ‘truth’ and the ‘whole truth’ turn into emotional truth, crossing the perimeter of simple facts and reality. There lies a vast ocean between the stories told and the stories untold. I remain remorseful of the denials and exclusion, silence and suppression of many other layers of gendered violence beyond the meta narratives of the War of Liberation (Saikia, 2011, Hossain and Mohsin, 2018).
II
Methodological concerns

The methodological journey here traversed an uneven and complex terrain. The study used both primary and secondary sources applying one on one interviews with key protagonists of the women’s movement representing three major women’s organisations of the country, namely, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, (BMP), Women for Women (WfW) and Naripokkho (NP). Secondary sources were consulted by looking at books, articles, newspaper archives, pamphlets, video and photo archives, internet sources and other published and unpublished documents related to the issues. All the respondents (eight in total) were purposively selected depending upon their involvement, leadership, contribution in formulating feminist agendas around the topic. These key figures\(^1\) are the pioneers in each of the selected organisations\(^2\) and beyond and have been involved in the women’s movement since 1971 and before. I have mainly asked them, what were the primary issues that they had to address in post war situation and how do they feel about it now? In depth interviews and qualitative approaches were critical methodological stance adopted here. It is a narrative with a historical perspective, looking back at the activism of the women’s movement which revolved around the historical moments of the War of Liberation and women.

These detailed interviews (at some point turned into life stories) have actually helped me to comprehend the inner layers of the movement and its various facades usually absent in secondary sources. The research process was ‘involved’ and distinctively subjective. Distance between the researcher and the researched was

\(^1\) See Annexure 1 for profiles of the selected respondents.

\(^2\) See Annexure 2 for profiles of the selected organisations.
merged in almost to the same critical level (Harding, 1987), where the respondents became the true participants of the entire research process. It entailed sharing my own views with the respondents, while sharpening my own ethical and theoretical speculations (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). Often the interviews took the shape of interactive discussion embedded in both of our personal convictions, views and perspectives. Many of the interviewees were closely known to me. This knowledge and familiarity actually aided me in gaining closer proximity with the subject. From a feminist methodological perspective (Fonow & Cook, 1991), I considered this an asset rather than a hindrance to the research process. Respondents representing the women’s movement are also found to be reflective and analysing their own position. Reactions and responses were found to be shaped by recalls, continuous visiting and revisiting of the traumatic period, moulded by contemplation and re-examination in retrospection.

The questions were simple but the answers were not, neither did they remain limited to only those. The interviews had always turned into a dialogue, exchanging of views and information, mutual cross checking of details, taking part in constructing and deconstructing the history. Sometimes the exchanges became very emotional, paused by silent tears, especially during our discussion on 1971-72. Laughter and mirth, humour and small anecdotes were also shared along with fond memories and reminiscences. Reflective analysis encompassed both self-criticism and deconstruction of particular events, looking at responses by others and even of their own comments in reflection. Failures and disappointments were often identified as being time bound, limited to its own historical context and narrow perimeter, boundaries and limits of their own

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3 I will be using ‘respondents’, ‘participants’ and ‘interviewee’ interchangeably as and when required.
understanding were highlighted. Insights, elucidations and reflective analysis thus emerged from their own vantage point.

This study is part of a larger study on the women’s movement of Bangladesh covering the time frame of 1971-2000. As mentioned earlier, one-on-one interviews\(^4\) were conducted with nine persons in total who considered as one of the main figures delineating the full range of the movement during the specific time frame. Most of the interviews were conducted in between March to September, 2011. Some discussions, exchanges and interviews were also conducted during 2009-10. Often the interviews continued for three to four days and one issue got entangled with others. 1971 continued to pervade our discussion, atrocities against women and responses towards related issues were inexplicably linked with more contemporary issues associated to women’s body and sexuality. It was rather difficult to isolate 1971 and women from the broader canvas of the women’s movement. This study is thus a ragged piece of cloth torn away from the bigger nakshi kantha (embroidered quilt) of the women’s movement with intricate and complex designs.

\(^4\) I have given the recorded CD containing their voices to the respondents hoping that this would help them to sketch their own role in their own words.
III
Genocide, Mass Rape and Atrocity

25th March 1971 crackdown by the Pakistan army is marked by mass killing, genocide, wartime rape and atrocities against women. After the nine month long war ‘East Pakistan’ became independent from ‘West Pakistan’ and Bangladesh emerged as a new independent country on 16th December 1971.

Calculated killing and mass rape was a central feature of genocide in 1971. General Yahya Khan had clearly said: “Kill three millions of them and the rest will eat out of our hands” (Ahmed, 2009). Major General Rao Farman Ali, Advisor to the Government of East Pakistan maintains in a recorded interview that Lt. General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, The Martial Law Administrator of East Pakistan, while taking charge of the administration, made it clear to the Pakistani military officers stationed in Dhaka that: “We are in enemy territory... we should change the race of this land” (Ahmed, 2009). An article in the Dawn, published on 22 March 2002 quotes Yahya Khan saying: “Pahle inko Mussalman karo” (First make them Muslim).

Bina D’Costa (2011) while highlighting the significance of this anecdote stated that at the senior most level of the Pakistan army, there was a perception that Bengalis were not proper Muslims. This perception also fed into two other notions on the question for identity: that Bengalis are not patriotic Pakistanis and they were too close to Hindu India (D’Costa, 2011; Mookherjee, 2008). The complex relationship between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh could be understood in the context of the partition (Butalia, 1998) and the incidence of mass exodus in 1947 had shaped India’s and Pakistan’s position towards each other. East Pakistan became a significant pawn in this rivalry (D’Costa, 2011).
Bangladesh emerged from the ashes of genocide and mass rape around which the genealogy of feminism is now entwined. Amidst all this complexity, ambiguity and confusion I would now like to turn to the issue of WoL in 1971 as the starting point for the emergence of feminist thought and movement in the new Bangladesh. To begin with, the paper will deal with a background of the issue and then move on to the responses by the key respondents\(^5\). The main issues covered are war-time rape, rehabilitation process, abortion of rape survivors, adoption of war children and the state title of Birangona.

\(^5\) For the sake of preserving the anonymity of the respondents I may like to avoid directly mentioning their names. However the organisational affiliations would be mentioned as and where necessary. However I would like to identify them here as not only my respondents but as the central characters, participants of the research process and feminists of the women’s movement in Bangladesh.
IV

Wartime Atrocity and Post War Scenario: Rehabilitation, Rape, War Babies, Abortion, Adoption and *Birangona*

Rape

There is much dispute and debate over the number of people killed during the war and women raped. It is often said that 30, 00,000 were killed, 2, 00,000 to 4, 00,000 women were raped\(^6\). However, the number of rapes that actually occurred in Bangladesh will probably–never be known. This is because “.... Rape wherever it occurs is considered a profound offence against individual and community honour. Raped women are dejected and ostracised by their husband, families and are often isolated from communities” (Thomas & Regan, 1994; Parveen, 2007; Saikia, 2011). This observation remains crucial to the Bangladesh context till today.

In the context of Bangladesh culture, as in many others, rape is a matter of shame and stigma (a question of *izzat/honour and lajja* (*shame* in English). Women are not likely to report or record rape. Her position and decisions around rape and sexual violence are largely shaped and determined by attitudes prevailing within the patriarchal state and society. Despite the pervasiveness of rape, it often remains a hidden element of conflict situations (Mohsin, 1997a; Mohsin, 1997b; Guhathakurta, 2001). Furthermore, rape is also seen as a tangible reward for masculine or victor soldiers, and also as unfortunate but inevitable side effect of sending men to war

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\(^6\) See *Bangladeshir Swadhinota Juddho: Dalipatra* [The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents] (Vol. 8); Brownmiller (1975); Kabir & Mehedi (2006); Ahmed (2009); Mookherjee (2008).
while leaving women behind unprotected without any males. “To the victors go the spoils”\textsuperscript{7}– a war cry for centuries has sort of legitimised rape during conflict/war situation. Changing their race by raping them, a weapon of war used for ethnic cleansing remains another ‘justification’ for rape in war (Chowdhury, 2007, 1993; Elshtain, 1982; Papenek, 1994).

Massive number of rapes took place throughout the country during the entire period of nine months in 1971. Afterwards, these affected women were rescued from bunkers, camps, prisons and army stations. Many of them were pregnant, physically and mentally devastated. Many committed suicide when rescued (The Liberation War of Bangladesh: Documents, 1982; Brownmiller 1975; Maleka Khan, interviewed in March, 2010).

The nation felt ‘jeopardised’ through this act of atrocity committed against women. As women’s ‘chastity’, the central element of Bengali nationalist imagination, was ‘lost’ and ‘the conquered status of masculine impotence’ (Brownmiller, 1975) was confronted with the real, at-hand problem of war babies. Rape of women during the nine months of Muktijuddho (War of Liberation) posed a great threat to the national imagination (Hossain, 2009). What to do with the rape victims, what to do with women who are pregnant with ‘enemy’ children, what to do with the war babies were the main challenges that had to be faced by both the state and the women’s movement. The whole range of dilemmas, ambiguities and tension around the issue of rape requires particular attention in order to understand the nation-state relationship and formulation of feminist thought (Gaitskell & Unterhalter, 1989; Huston, 1982, Mohsin, 1997a).

\textsuperscript{7}“Juddha moydaney naari gonimater maal” in Bangla (women are the booty in the battle field) (Kabir & Mehedi, 2006).
Figure 1: Pictures of Rehabilitation Centres.

Source: Collected from Personal Album of Maleka Khan
Wartime Rape, State and the Women’s Movement: The Juxtaposed Dilemma of the Rehabilitation Process

After independence, the new government established by the President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was mainly preoccupied with attempts to deal with the ravages of war, famine and the deteriorating law and order situation. It was difficult for the new state to give specific attention to the situation of women except, in connection with the rehabilitation of war victims. A Relief and Rehabilitation Board was set up on 18\textsuperscript{th} February 1972 charged with the specific duties of providing relief and rehabilitation on an emergency basis to women who were raped as well as to women who were widowed, abandoned or otherwise affected by the war (Kabeer, 1991).

The inherent contradictions and notions around the purity-pollution debate concerning rape led to ambiguous responses from different stakeholders. The very ‘masculine’ Bangladesh leadership entrusted the social workers, women activists and medical practitioners with the primary responsibility of dealing with the ‘raped women’ (D’Costa, 2011). State was not insensitive to the issue. State declared the violated women as Birangona; the war heroines, the valiant warriors (female) of the country.

The common story that went around at the time was that when violated women, abandoned by their family came to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman asking him what they would say to the people if they were asked about their identity. He said “... write my name as your father, address, 32 Dhanmondi”\textsuperscript{8}. Nonetheless, he also declared

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\textsuperscript{8} 32 Dhanmondi the address where the President, Bongobondhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman used to live. This comment by him was vaguely remebered by Najma Chowdhury during a personal communication in her house in 2009. Also mentioned in Birangona Birmata Johananey Ekattorer Voyal Smrity, in Bangla (The Horrific Memoires of 71 by the Valiant War Heroines and Mothers) published by Director, Research & Publication Department, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, ed. Liakat Ali Lucky, Bikash Mudron: Dhaka.
that, “...none of the bastard babies, who carry the blood of Pakistanis, will be allowed to remain in Bangladesh” (cited in D’Costa, 2003). Bangladesh state, which controlled women’s motherhood, assumed a strong paternal role and implicitly encouraged women to have abortions. War babies were graphic reminders\(^9\) of how national events took shape through women’s body.

**The Rehabilitation Process: Interfaces between the State and the Women’s Movement**

As stated earlier the first response from the state was to establish rehabilitation centres for women war victims all over the country. There were two types of centres, private and state sponsored public centres. Both received direct assistance and support from the government. Within seven days of independence, under the leadership of Sufia Kamal\(^10\), a group of women activists

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\(^9\) During early December 1971, while my father was working as a doctor in Dhaka Medical College, he came up with a proposal to adopt a ‘war baby’. My mother, after considering it for a while, gave her consent. However, the whole plan of bringing the baby girl in was dismissed after my maternal uncle (Shaheed Munier Chowdhury) was abducted by the Pakistani collaborators. He was picked up from his mother’s house on 14th December (now observed nationally as Intellectual Martyres’ Day) and was never found. The apprehension that plagued my mother’s mind was, ‘Would she remind me of my brother every time I look at her? Would this event affect my behaviour towards the baby?’ Nobody had any answers to these questions at that time and, eventually, the whole process of adopting the baby was abandoned. I still wonder, after all these years, what it would have been like to have a sister who was adopted—would she have been a constant reminder of enemy camps? I still don’t have the answer.

\(^10\) Sufia Kamal, (20 June 1911 – 20 November 1999) was a Bangladeshi poet, freedom fighter, feminist and political activist. Sufia Kamal was an influential cultural icon in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s and an important civil society leader in independent Bangladesh. Her feminist activism dates from pre independence period. She was the founding leader of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. She died in 1999 and was the first woman to be given a state funeral in the country.
took spontaneous initiatives to rehabilitate the war ‘victims’\textsuperscript{11}. This effort later crystallised on 7th January 1972 and the “Central Women Rehabilitation Centre” (\textit{Kendriyo Mohila Punorbashon Shongstha}) was established partnering with the Directorate of Training, Research, Evaluation and Communication (TREC) of the Bangladesh Family Planning Association, and The Directorate of Social Welfare and Labour. Finally, Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board (BWRB) was established in the same year.

Apart from Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP), there was Bangladesh Mahila Shamiti (BMS), the female wing of Awami League (AL) headed by Nilima Ibrahim\textsuperscript{12}, all of which were involved in the rehabilitation process. The government established its office in the old office of APWA (All Pakistan Women’s Association)\textsuperscript{13}. BMS started to work under government instruction. There was an open call in the newspapers not to hide war victims but to bring them to the Centres. These Centres did not directly mention victims of rape but declared themselves as an open rehabilitation platform for all victims, such as for women who have lost husbands, children, homes, or have been raped.

\textsuperscript{11} Such rehabilitation programmes also took place in the refugee camps in India by Indian women activists. See Ekti Jatir Jonmo (Birth of a Nation) in Bangla, edited by Hameeda Hossain and Amen Mohsin. Dhaka UPL and ASK.

\textsuperscript{12} Nilima Ibrahim, educationist, writer and a social worker, founding member of \textit{Bangladesh Mahila Shamiti}. She was closely involved with the rehabilitation process for the war affected in new Bangladesh. Apart from her numerous publications she is well known for her book \textit{Ami Birangona Bolchhi} (This is Birangona Speaking) in Bangla.

\textsuperscript{13} The All Pakistan Women's Association, or APWA, is/was a voluntary, non-profit and non-political organisation founded in 1949 by Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan in erstwhile Pakistan.
There were about eighteen such Centres across the country to accommodate war victims. This was the first institutional attempt to rehabilitate *nirjatito* (raped, violated, tortured and traumatised) women. Maleka Khan, Director of the private rehabilitation centre, has spoken in her interview about her experience with war victims during that period (Tahmina, 2009). After independence, it became increasingly clear to all that thousands of women had been raped and tortured by the Pakistani army. Maleka Khan with the help of Sufia Kamal, Badrunnessa Ahmed, Meher Kabir, Hasna Hazari, Dr Halima Khatun, Sufia Shaheed, Firoza Khatun, Begum Shamsunnahar and others, started to look for a place to house these women. Finally, they were sanctioned with two houses in Eskaton (House No. 88 and No. 2) Dhaka. Mr Bazlur Majid, Director of Social Welfare Department gave his full support to this particular rehabilitation process. Another main centre in Dhaka was located in a deserted house on Road No. 4, in Dhanmondi, operated under the leadership of Nilima Ibrahim and Moshfiqah Mahmud. Bongobondhu also asked the *Shaheed Jaya-s* (wives and family members of the Martyred intellectuals) to join and work for the

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14 Maleka Khan was involved with this rehabilitation centre as a volunteer since its inception and later served as the Director of the Board from 1973-1976. She was also involved in the Language Movement during 1952, where she actively participated in demonstrations and processions in the street during the Pakistan period. She is an activist who was involved in the rehabilitation process as a volunteer during 1970 cyclone. She was the Secretary for East Pakistan Girl’s Guide Association. Right after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s historic speech on 7th March, she volunteered to initiate women’s training in first aid and civil defence along with parliament members and ministers. She closely worked with Badrunnessa Ahmed, President of Bangla Craft, the first elected female president of FBCCI. She made her first trip into the cantonment, to the MP Hostel in Nakhalpara, Dhaka on 20/21 December, 1971 and brought out several women who had been held there. In the following days, she made repeated trips and recalls that neither she, nor the totally distraught, half-dressed women, whose hair had been chopped short, were able to speak a word as she gently wrapped them in blankets, loaded them into the jeep and took them to a safe house.
rehabilitation centres. Lily Chowdhury (wife of Shaheed Muneir Chowdhury), Basanti Guhathakurta\(^{15}\) (wife of Shaheed Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta), were also in the Board with many others. Basanti Guhatahkurta played a very active role in the rehabilitation process. Her daughter Meghna Guhatahkurta clearly remembers\(^{16}\) going to the Dhanmondi center with her mother.

The Board had two broad goals: i) To organise clinical services wherever it was possible in Bangladesh, within the limited time span of three to four months, to provide medical treatment to the rape survivors and ii) To plan, organise and establish facilities and institutions, especially vocational training centres, to effectively rehabilitate thousands of ‘destitute women’. Destitute women were not necessarily ‘violated women’ in state discourse but were considered as ‘war affected’ women, who had lost either their husbands or the ‘bread earners’ of the family, or had lost their property during the war (Banglapedia, 2006). Women leaders and activists were involved in this process of rehabilitation and worked in association with the state.

The foremost reaction was of complete shock, fear and sheer lack of words. ‘Ami nirbak, orao nirbak (I was speechless and they had nothing to say either)’ (Maleka Khan, cited in Tahmina, 2009). Nevertheless the primary emotion that was at play was sympathy, support and sharing of grief and loss, which had affected almost everyone. Maleka Khan herself had seen 5000 case histories in her Centre alone. Although the actual number will never be known, one

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\(^{15}\) Basanti Guhathakurta (1922-1993), an educationist, member of Kudrat e Khoda Education Commission, a writer and an activist was one of the members of Nari Punorbashon Kendra set up by the first independent Government of Bangladesh to rehabilitate war widows and women raped by the Pakistani and the Al-badre forces. See http://prajnyaarchives.org/lifestories-basanti-guhathakurta/accessed on October, 2020.

\(^{16}\) Personal communication over phone on October 20, 2020.
can easily imagine that the rehabilitation centres could only touch the tip of the iceberg. What happened to those who could not reach the centres will never be known and their stories would remain buried under silence and amnesia.

The sheer magnitude of the violence soon wiped out all prejudices that had torn down the boundaries of the traditional purity-pollution framework. The patriarchal state was also blaming itself for not being able to protect its women. The main activities of the centre were to rescue and bring back women from cantonments, torture cells and other stations. Freedom fighters, journalists, people from all walks of life came forward to help these women. Rescuing and rehabilitation process continued for about four years in numerous forms (Maleka Khan, Interviewed in March 2010).

The immediate need was to provide both physical and psychological support, the former in the form of physical check-ups, treating wounds and physical injuries, and providing long-term treatment for STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases). Many of the victims tried to commit suicide; some were completely deranged and had become mentally unstable. In response to the call of the Bangladesh government, foreign doctors came to Bangladesh to treat and perform abortions for the rape victims. There were professional doctors, psychiatrists, medical practitioners from home and abroad for their treatment and to provide psychological support. Among these professionals the most widely quoted was Dr Geoffrey Davis, an Australian surgeon. According to him, about 95% of wartime pregnancies were terminated in Dhaka based centres alone. These centres performed more than 100 abortions during the first month of the women’s stay there, and 2500 in total (Mookherjee, 2007).
Abortion

According to Dr Geoffrey Davis, more than 400,000 women were victims of rape, violence and desertion. Most of these women were suffering from STD, had to undergo abortions, were in risk of not being able to bear children again and might suffer from lifelong reproductive and other medical problems. He also added that before any help from outside the country became available, near about 200,000 pregnant women had already undergone abortions through informal sources like dai\textsuperscript{17} or quacks (cited in Kabir & Mehedi, 2006). By the time any formal medical help like Dr Davis and others’ arrived, eight months had already passed for many pregnant women. Some had to give birth -- some opted for adoption, and some kept their babies with them. Dr Geoffrey Davis accused the government of providing wrong information concerning the number of women subjected to rape during the WoL. In reality, the magnitude of the number was not even comprehended by the government. Silencing of the cases was also another reason for lack of documentation and proper information about the rape victims.

However, as perceived by the entire nation, abortion was seen as the ‘natural and logical’ solution for the rape victims. The task of abortion was taken over by the international community, state and the UN. Interestingly, during the war, USA was in support of Pakistan but immediately after the war a group of American doctors, along with doctors from Australia, travelled to Bangladesh to aid the abortion mission (Abortion Team to Travel to Bangladesh, 1972).

\textsuperscript{17} Local birth attendant.
Creating Exceptional Legal Frameworks to Aid Rehabilitation Process

Abortion was illegal in Bangladesh at the time and still is. However, the Bangladesh government introduced two exceptional laws by suspending all existing legal frameworks surrounding abortion and adoption. It is important to note that no formal legal system or even Constitution of the new nation was at hand during that time. The exceptional measures that are often adopted during times of political crisis need to be analysed in political rather than in solely juridical and constitutional terms (Agamben, 1995\textsuperscript{18}, as cited in Mookherjee, 2007). Almost all thought that, women who were raped needed to be “protected from the emotions of motherhood” (quoted by Mookherjee, 2007). The only solution to the problem of raped women with babies was made possible by the emotional and physical “dekinning” (Mookherjee, 2007) of the raped women from their children (war babies).

The primary activities of the Board thus were to provide emergency medical help, including ‘termination of pregnancies and treatment of gynaecological disorders for the victims of the Pakistani army’s physical torture’ (NBBWRP,\textsuperscript{19} 1974, as cited in Mookherjee, 2007), which meant that the existing law against abortion from the former East Pakistan was temporarily suspended through this new government order. Medical care was provided under the management of International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) London and USAID. These two organisations donated money, set up abortion clinics, provided medication and coordinated the services from US, UK and Australia.


\textsuperscript{19} NBBWRP (National Board of Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Programme), 1974, Women’s Work. Dhaka Bangladesh Cooperative Book Society.
It is pertinent to mention that the right to obtain an abortion, exercise control over one’s own body and movement for reproductive rights did not emerge in newly born Bangladesh as a concrete agenda during the seventies. The whole rehabilitation process emphasised the need for immediate abortion for the rape victims. However, this decision of the state was contradictory to *Shariat law* prevalent in West Pakistan and considered forbidden by The Quran. The Government of Bangladesh later institutionalised this extraordinary step by legalising MR (Menstrual Regulation)\(^\text{20}\) in 1972, which means termination of the foetus within 90 days became legal thus conforming to the Islamic sanctions (Three menstrual cycles are necessary for ensuring pregnancy, as mentioned in Sura Al Bakara, The Quran). MR was the name given to a device in transnational family planning circles organised by USAID’s office of IPPF. MR is a regular procedure widely used in

\(^\text{20}\) MR is distinct from abortion which is a procedure performed up to and between 24 to 28 weeks after conception. Abortions were done under the semi-legal framework of Menstrual Regulations or MR. Though Bangladesh circumvented the issues of legality related to abortion, termination of pregnancies was permitted and encouraged during 1972. This has had significant effects on the family planning programme of Bangladesh. Having assisted in wartime abortions, IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Foundation) formally introduced MR in 1973 and relied heavily on trained birth attendants, or female welfare workers for terminating unwanted pregnancies. Mookherjee (2007) contends that a large number of women raped during the war received professional training through this family planning programme and worked as field workers. The introduction of MR not only institutionalised the family planning programme in Bangladesh but also ensured implementation of policies for population control. MR clinics set up in Dhaka with support from the Population Council and the International Women’s Health Coalition, a New York based feminist NGO, marked the beginning of the rapid growth of NGOs and the privatisation of women’s health services in the eighties. Use of this process became the template for subsequent population control programmes through transnational funding for reproductive health. (Murphy n.d, as cited in Mookherjee, 2007). Reproductive health issues in relation to MR are not in the purview of this thesis but demands attention for further analysis.
Bangladesh even today. Interestingly the practice of abortion was never given a definitive official or legal status in post war Bangladesh. The process of ensuring wartime abortion was enjoined through a governmental order of which no documentation was found. One of the activists of the movement in her interview with the researcher (Maleka Begum, Interviewed in March, 2009) vaguely remembers an order which was sent directly to the relevant authorities, but was never documented. The Constitution of Bangladesh was passed only in October 1972, almost a year after the war ended in December 1971. Termination of pregnancies resulting from rape was only permissible within this period of ten months (i.e. December 1971-October 1972).

These abortions continued to take place mainly in Dhaka till October of 1972. Wartime abortion was never given any official or legal status and tragic silence shrouds the whole affair of mass scale abortions and adoption. People who were involved in this process—the doctors, social workers, volunteers, and women activists—all deemed it necessary: “We did not know what else to do. The women had to be re-established in their families and homes.....how else could we have helped them?” (Maleka Khan; interviewed in March, 2010).

21 It is important to note here that the women’s movement actually gained in terms of reproductive rights because of this exceptional law introduced during an exceptional time. Though this step was initiated by the patriarchal and paternal mind-set of the state and prompted by the international population control network, a separate movement for legalising abortion was not a necessity for Bangladesh women’s movement after that time. However, it is important to remember that many abortions are being performed under the umbrella of MR and many are still at work in a very hazardous manner, posing a threat to the lives and reproductive health of the women concerned.
**War Babies**\(^{22}\) and Adoption

Banglapedia (2006, vol. 10) refers to ‘war babies’ as babies born to Bengali women as consequence of their being raped by Pakistani soldiers and other criminals who took advantage of the situation during the WoL. They were referred to as ‘unwanted children’, the ‘enemy children’, the ‘illegitimate children’, and more contemptuously, ‘the bastards’. Their birth mothers are also popularly and officially referred to as ‘violated women’, ‘dishonoured women’, ‘distressed women’, ‘rape victims’, ‘the victims of military repression’, ‘the affected women’, ‘the unfortunate women’ and finally as *Birangona* in the official discourse. As discussed in previous sections, despite mass scale abortions, many war babies were born in rehabilitation centres or in homes. Unfortunately, accurate or even fairly reliable statistics and information are not available about these children. Only limited evidences have been found in government and non-governmental organisational records as well as in records of foreign missions and organisations. There lies no other way but to make guesswork and assumptions about the number of war babies.

Newspaper reports of the time, which included interviews of Justice K. M Sobhan, Chairperson representing Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation Board (BWRB), Sister Margaret Mary of Superior Missionaries of Charity, and IPPF personnel Odert Von Shoultz, reveal that about 300 to 400 children were born on the premises of rehabilitation centres in Dhaka known as *Sheva Shadan*. Again, international reports indicate that the estimated number of

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\(^{22}\) During 1972-73, I was a student of Shaheen School and students of different ages from *Shishu Palli* used to come to school in a packed bus. As children of 8/9 years of age, we did not have clear ideas about who they were but we all perceived their ‘otherness’. Now I know that they were war babies and Shaheen School, situated in Mohakhali, had agreed to take them as their students when other schools had refused.
war babies was 10,000\textsuperscript{23} which is, by far, the largest number quoted in any records that referred to the birth of the war babies during 1971-72 (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10).

Some of the war babies were absorbed within Bangladeshi families. Some were rehabilitated by SOS Children’s Village International in Bangladesh, *(SOS Shishu Palli)*\textsuperscript{24} situated in Shyamoli, Dhaka, some were given away for international adoption (Chowdhury, 2015)

**Adoption**

The government established a two-tier ‘cleansing process’— either the women were to abort or they were urged to give up the babies for adoption. The reactions of mothers to their impending motherhood also varied. Some were eager to give up the babies, who were agonizing reminders of the sufferings they had to endure; a reminder of how national events took shape through the bodies of

\textsuperscript{23} Executive Director of the Canadian UNICEF Committee, following his visits to both occupied and independent Bangladesh, reported to their headquarters in Ottawa (Banglapedia, 2006).

\textsuperscript{24} SOS Children's Villages International is the umbrella organisation of all SOS Children's Village associations worldwide. SOS Children's Villages is an independent, non-governmental, social development organisation that provides family-based care for children in 133 countries and territories specially of those without parental care. SOS *Shishu Palli* was established in Dhaka under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Hermann Gmeiner, who visited Bangladesh in 1972 immediately after the War of Liberation with his assistant - Mr. Helmut Kutin, present President of the organisation and met with *Bangabandhu* Sheikh Mujibur Rahman with the proposal of establishing SOS Children's Villages in Bangladesh. *Bangabandhu* welcomed Professor Hermann Gmeiner's proposal. On behalf of the government of Bangladesh, the then Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare signed an agreement with the organisation on 17 May 1972 to start SOS Children's Village activities in Bangladesh.
women. Pakistanis in general were taller and lighter skinned compared to darker and shorter Bengalis. This difference in physical attributes added significant distress and agony to the Bengali women pregnant with war children (D’Costa, 2003; Brownmiller, 1975).

Ex official from the Rehabilitation Board talked about young women who felt close to their babies and did not want to give up the babies for adoption but soon realized that it was necessary to give up the babies so that they could get married and start a new life. Family members, and in fact the whole national feeling, echoed against these babies. Many newspaper articles, letters to editors, state speeches, as well as interviews with social workers, women leaders and activists indicated that the general consensus was that getting rid of the babies as soon as possible was the most desirable option (Mookherjee 2007, interviews of the activists).

In fact, women were not given any choice about the future of these babies in this country. The social workers were sympathetic to these women and their emotions related to their children but in the end the question of choice and options were largely downplayed and purity was given the highest priority in the discourse of nation-building. One of the key protagonists of the movement recalled a young girl from her centre who did not want to part with her baby. She was crying desperately, but no one offered to help or said, ‘Let us take care of the baby and the mother’. While other respondents involved in the process stressed that no one was forced either to abort or handover the babies for adoption. According to Maleka Khan almost all were eager to get rid of the memories associated with the baby. Nevertheless in the mega discourse of nationhood, these children were labelled as ‘bastards’ and it was made very clear from the very beginning that they were not wanted which largely shaped the issue of ‘choice’ for the women in the centres. However, this decision was not devoid of emotion.
Nilima Ibrahim mentioned in her interview to D’Costa that, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman requested her to send the children away. “They should be raised as human beings with honour. Besides, I do not want to keep those with polluted blood in this country.” (D’Costa, 2003). The emotions and sentiments around the war babies were fraught with dilemma and contradictions. While the war babies were not to be accepted in Bangladesh, the persistent motive was to ensure a good life by sending them away to foreign lands, away from the stigma and hatred that is rooted in their own country.

The Catholic Convent of Mother Theresa in Calcutta offered them shelter. *Shishu bhaban* (Children’s Home) was a drop-in centre established in old Dhaka for the unwanted babies from women who were willing to relinquish them (*The Daily Shangbad*, January 17, 1972). Mother Theresa visited Dhaka immediately after independence and through her colleagues at Missionaries of Charity, and the Government of Bangladesh’s Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and two other Canadian organisations became involved in the adoption process. Canada was one of the first countries in the world to express an interest to adopt the war babies (Chowdhury, 2015).

D’Costa elaborates that families in Canada, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Australia and Sweden adopted most of the babies. In addition, there were many organisations such as the US-based Holt Adoption Programme, Inc. and Terre des Hommes. Christian organisations were largely motivated by Catholic pro-life principles and their position was against abortion due to their religious beliefs. Mother Theresa reported that, during her visits, she barely found any rape victims in the camps but that there were lots of babies and they were eventually adopted. Dhaka office was supposed to have all the records but none of the researchers such as Nayanika Mookherjee, Rubaiyet Hossain, Shahadat Hossain or Bina D’Costa could trace the records of babies that were given away for
adoption. Mustafa Chowdhury (2015) only later talks about a group of war babies who were sent to Canada for international adoption.

**New Laws to Facilitate Adoption**

In order to facilitate the adoption process, the Inter-Country Adoption Law (Habiba, 1997) and the *Bangladesh Abandoned Children (Special Provision) Order* was hastily passed on October 23, 1972\(^{25}\). When the first contingent of fifteen war babies from Bangladesh arrived in Canada on 19\(^{th}\) July 1972, they received comprehensive media coverage for days. The key media message was that interracial adoption programmes were positive initiatives and that Canadians of diverse background should endorse such initiatives (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10). Apart from international adoptions throughout 1972, various orphanages and the SOS Children’s Villages Project were established in Dhaka at this juncture, to facilitate care for abandoned children. Some of which are still active in Dhaka (Mookherjee, 2007).

The main purpose of the adoption law was to ensure safe exit of the ‘war babies’. The state order legitimised the adoption process, a practice that contradicted the prevalent Muslim personal law. The law defined abandoned children as those who were ‘deserted or unclaimed or born out of wedlock’ and authorized the government to appoint ‘statutory guardians’—a person or authority entrusted with care and custody of the person of an abandoned child. However, no mention was made about the adoptee’s right to inheritance. As per Muslim personal law, inheritance is primarily determined by ‘blood’. This lack of clarity regarding inheritance highlights the fact that, this particular adoption law was primarily

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\(^{25}\) Government promulgated a Presidential Order, No. 124 of 1972, entitled *The Bangladesh Abandoned Children (special Provisions) Order*. It was later repealed by Ordinance no. 5 in 1982, and replaced with Guardian and Ward Act 1890 which prohibits foreigners from adopting minors who are citizens of Bangladesh (Chowdhury and Shamim, 1994).
preoccupied with ‘providing substitute homes for the unfortunate (emphasis mine) children’ (Chowdhury & Shamim, 1994), and no record had been kept to track their lives in the foreign lands.

However, this is not the end of the story. The first resistance to this adoption law came from the Islamist Party. Their main concern was that these children would probably be converted to Christianity or might be used in child pornography or prostitution in western countries (Mookherjee, 2007). Assumptions about babies born of Muslim mothers being destined to be raised as Christians in the adopting countries ‘made public opinion in Bangladesh quite hostile to the inter-country adoption initiative’ (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10:347). It is indeed paradoxical that women were neither allowed to choose the fate of their children nor the children allowed staying in the country. Nevertheless, the question of national ownership was highlighted around their assumed future religious identities. Interestingly, in one hand this particular group were in favour of abandoning the children while at the same time was claiming their religious identities as per the religious inclination of the state.

The questions surrounding war babies with all the paradox and ambiguities came to a close by 1974, when the babies were either transported by then to foreign lands as adopted or began to be raised at home as ‘normal’ citizens of Bangladesh.

**Disappearance of Records and Documentations**

In the rehabilitation centres, social workers and activists documented the personal histories of rape victims. These documents

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26 Despite Mookherjee’s (2007) reference to Jamat e Islam, the author remains a bit skeptical as the party was banned during that time. However Banglapedia confirms some debatable aspect in public opinion with regards to inter-country adoption initiative.
have, however, disappeared without any trace. Many contradictory comments and information around these rapes further deepens the silence. A respondent from BRWB alone recalls having records of 5000 women in her centre. All the records of war victims were kept in the rehabilitation centres, both at the government and the private ones. A social worker in her interview stated that she had heard the documents had been burnt to ensure the anonymity of the rape victims. According to one source, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman personally requested Nilima Ibrahim to destroy all documents in order to protect the women from social stigma (Begum, 2004). Consequently all records were put into an old tank and burnt (Akhtar, et al., 2013). Meher Kabir\textsuperscript{27} on the other hand said that she was closely connected to this rehabilitation process and that there was nothing much to destroy except for notations of the number of women visiting the centre. The record only contained a serial number and address or contact if any.

Maleka Begum from BMP, on the other hand remembers that documents were given to the \textit{Bangla Academy}\textsuperscript{28} for use in writing a comprehensive history of the genocide. Some presumed that all the records were actually destroyed after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, by subsequent governments, in order to erase traces and evidences of rape and genocide by the Pakistani army. None of the members of the rehabilitation would have destroyed those records, stated one of the activists who was closely associated with the rehabilitation process.

Despite the contradictory and confusing information, it is evident that no trace of the records of the women or children was

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\textsuperscript{27} Meher Kabir was working with the government rehabilitation centres during the early days of the rehabilitation process. She shared with the researcher in 2010 regarding her experiences with the rehabilitation process.

\textsuperscript{28} Bangla Academy is the national academy for promoting the Bangla (Bengali) language in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
found in subsequent years. Whatever happened to the records, the destruction hints at two possible motives. Firstly, destruction was considered necessary to safeguard the dignity and chastity of the victims, in order to smooth out their assimilation in society in the future\textsuperscript{29}. Secondly, destruction of records was purely politically motivated to erase the documentation of rape and genocide by the people who assumed power in the post-1975 scenario.

**Rehabilitation through Arranging Marriage**

The rehabilitation process beyond abortion and adoption entailed certain other activities. According to one of the key activists during the time, advertisements were posted in the daily newspapers regarding the marriage of these women. The Bangladesh government used to offer gifts like sewing machines or jobs for those who were willing to come forward and marry them. Many such marriages took place during the early seventies. Begum Fazilitunnessa Mujib, wife of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was once present during such a marriage ceremony and made a gift of her own necklace to the bride there\textsuperscript{30}.

\textsuperscript{29} Another event requires examination to understand the mind-set of rape victims in a patriarchal frame work. According to Nilima Ibrahim, during 1972 she met a group of about 40 women who were leaving the country with the war prisoners of Pakistan. They were adamant to go with their rapists, because they knew that they would have no place here in their own country. Nilima Ibrahim personally requested them to stay back and offered shelter to one particular young girl in her own house but she refused saying that everybody would abhor her when they begin to know about her history of being raped by the Pakistanis. The young girl felt that it was thus a better option for her to leave the country and accept whatever lay in her future in a foreign land in complete anonymity (Ibrahim, 1998). *Ain O Salish Kendro* interviews also reveal the events and experiences of rape victims later in their lives (Akhtar, et al., 2013).

\textsuperscript{30} Personal communication with Maleka Khan, March 2010.
BMP was against such advertisement and marriages with material incentives being offered. BMP shared their apprehension regarding such marriages with Justice K M Sobhan, Chairperson of the Women’s Rehabilitation Centres. However he was convinced that marriage was a necessary step towards the rehabilitation of these ‘violated’ women. He stated in a press conference on 3rd March 1972 that he would personally take up the responsibility of these women like a father (Konnya dae grosto pitar bhunika in Bangla) and would try to arrange marriages for the vulnerable war victims\(^{31}\). Soon after this, numerous letters started to arrive to the Board from young men eager to marry the victims. Almost all the letters contained demands for a big dowry—demand for ‘red Toyota car’ was mentioned quite explicitly in many.

Figure 2: Rehabilitation through arranging marriage: Sufia Kamal handing over the bride

\(^{31}\) Also see Mookherjee (2006).
Other Initiatives to Rehabilitate: Creating Employment, Training and the Idea of Sonargaon Craft Village

Apart from arranging marriages by using whatever means were available there were other initiatives to rehabilitate the women which stretched beyond the ‘traditional solutions’. Gradually when the initial trauma had subsided, volunteers started to probe into the personal skills or potentials of the war victims. Women activists looked beyond only marriage as a part of the rehabilitation process. Some of the activists proposed that the government establish a Craft Village at Sonargaon, Panam city. The process was started by leasing 100 acres of land at the outskirt of Dhaka city. The initial plan was to rehabilitate all these women at the craft village where they would become financially independent and later could take whatever decisions they would like to take regarding their lives. The process was initiated but soon abandoned after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1975). Later in 1976, with the initiative of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin\(^{32}\) the craft village started to take shape once again. By this time Maleka Khan had already left the rehabilitation centre and came forward to work with Zainul Abedin (Maleka Khan, interviewed in March, 2009). Eventually many war victims also received jobs in the craft village. There were other efforts (although moulded by the traditional gendered framework) for victims as well, such as vocational training, typing, embroidery, designing etc. State initiatives and support to help establish women as independent agents were not completely abandoned. The Board had its training centre situated in Baily Road, Eskaton, in Dhaka,

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\(^{32}\) Zainul Abedin (1914 – 1976) was the renowned painter, famous for his Famine Series paintings of 1943. He played a pioneering role in the modern art movement in Bangladesh that began, by all accounts, with the setting up of the Government Institute of Arts and Crafts (now Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka) in 1948 in Dhaka of which he was the founding principal. He is referred to with honour as Shilpacharya (Great Teacher of the Arts) in Bangladesh.
where training in secretarial skills, handicrafts and other vocations were introduced. The government also established “Bangladesh Freedom Fighters Welfare Trust”. This Trust was mainly established to rehabilitate disabled freedom fighters along with the dependents of Shaheeds (Martyred of WoL), or family members of the Muktijodhha (freedom fighter) in distress and requiring assistance. Through these programmes many women were rehabilitated with assistance in terms of cash money, vocational training, pensions, and scholarships including stipends for continuation of studies and to make arrangements for unmarried, widowed or abandoned women.

_Birangona the Heroic Woman/Valiant Warrior/War Heroine: ‘A Rose by any other Name Would Smell As Bitter’_34

Apart from the rehabilitation options of abortion, adoption, arranging marriage and training for the victims, the new state took the initiative to recognise the role of rape victims and address their ‘sacrifice’. The intention was to normalise the tension around the issue of mass rape. The title Birangona or ‘heroic woman’ was bestowed upon the rape victims35, valorising their sacrifice. From the perspective of the state it was an effort to claim respectability rather than ostracism or rejection for these women. Through its rehabilitation programme for the ‘violated women’, the government sought to enhance the self esteem of the victims and their status as the nation’s noble contributors. By honouring the Heroic Woman

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33 President’s order no. 94, 7th August 1972, official gazette, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Bangladesh.

34 “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet”34 is a commonly quoted line from William Shakespeare's play --Romeo and Juliet, in which Juliet argues that the names of things do not matter, only what things "are."

35 Dainik Purbadesh, December 23, 1971. A news was published on behalf of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh saying that women violated in the War of Liberation are ‘Birangona’ (Juddhe Nirjatito naari ra Birangona- in Bangla).
the government declared that they deserve national recognition for their valiant role in the WoL. The government, after several rounds of consultation with relevant groups, came forward to honour them with the title Birangona. It was also believed that such acknowledgment of their contribution and sacrifice would open up doors for the Birangonas and they would be accepted by the society with respect and honour, as both triumphant and tragic (Banglapedia, 2006, vol. 10).

However, the title of Birangona was not unconditional. The issue of rape soon sparked the whole debate of shame and pollution which was being juxtaposed with the idea of honor and pride. Key figures interviewed for this research shared that Prime Minister Sheik Mujib Rahman repeatedly called the Birangona women his daughters in public meetings and asked the nation to welcome them back into the community and the family. However, given the cultural context of Bangladesh as of many countries, wartime rape is a phenomenon to be kept silent or pushed back into forgetfulness. Although the Bangladesh government declared them Birangona in order to rehabilitate them and reduce social ostracism instead of shrouding them, the entire effort went in vain. ‘Violated women’ were instead exposed to public exclusion, easily identifiable in case any woman wanted to claim the title. Moreover, the contradictory position of the state was manifested through its abortion and adoption process defining the framework of citizenship for the new nation. The state had already taken a clear position around ‘raped women’ and their children—the war babies would not be allowed to remain in the country. The reaction to these steps was varied. At the beginning many women who had been raped accepted this state

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36 Previously it was ‘dhorshita nari’ in Bangla—raped women. In contemporary vocabulary it’s ‘dhorshoner shikar’- victim of rape. Violated women-- or ‘nirjatito nari’ in Bangla was widely used during the seventies.
recognition but soon to push the title into oblivion, not ready to make this violent event in their lives public.

According to Mookherjee (2007) many social workers also argued that this labelling of heroines actually made these women more visible and prone to social stigma. As stated earlier, the declaration of Birangona had never come from any official order except for a press release in Dainik Purbadesh, 1971. Nevertheless they were mentioned frequently in government speeches, letters to editors, numerous newspaper articles on the state of ‘raped women’ and their rehabilitation process. Soon, the term Birangona actually assumed the meaning of ‘women raped during the war’ in popular phrasing. The declaration unintentionally highlighted the social hypocrisy and ambiguity surrounding the issue of female virtue in Bangladesh. As suggested by Naila Kabeer, “the term was an attempt to disguise the sexual violence of the crime so as to make social ostracism of its victims less severe. It only partially succeeded, and many of the women were unable to return to their homes. A five per cent quota of government employment reserved for rape victims was, needless to say, never filled, since it merely served to pinpoint who they were” (Huda, 1987, as cited in Kabeer, 1991).

Following this broad overview this paper would now delineate the specific responses from the women’s movement about the rape and atrocity against women during the WoL and the rehabilitation process.
V

Responses from the Women’s Movement: The Rehabilitation Process, Abortion, Adoption and Birangona

‘The Rehabilitation Process: A Historical Necessity’

Apart from the reactions and responses stated above, more detailed narratives are documented below that try to unearth the complexity of wartime atrocity. Responses around wartime rape, abortion, adoption and the status of Birangona are wide-ranging and complex as all the respondents were making a journey to the past of forty years back, revisiting history and travelling through the volatile days of early seventies. Past and present intermingled with current understanding of violence and atrocities against women and girls and other related issues. Responses also sprang from personal consciousness apart from just organisational. One reason for such personal reactions was largely due to the historical fact that except BMP none of the selected organisations were in operation back then. The protagonists whom I interviewed also had varying situational location. Some were directly involved; some were out of the country and some were too young to be a direct part of it. Nevertheless, all had something to say. Their voices were thus helpful in conceptualising the feminist consciousness during that nascent stage and were helpful in shedding light onto contemporary feminist debate and understanding.

The responses were charged with emotion, reminiscence, shadowed by amnesia and lack of accuracy, and analysed in retrospect. Any straight forward answer was difficult to attain as many decades have elapsed. So many things have happened and the feminists and activists involved in the process themselves have also
grown into different people over the years. Despite all these shades and tinges, the responses and views can be divided into two major streams. One group thought that whatever decisions and actions had been taken regarding wartime rape and the subsequent rehabilitation process were only what was appropriate at that time. In other words, rehabilitation process taken up only responded to the demands of the time.

According to the first view, three of my respondents (Roushan Jahan, Najma Chowdhury, Maleka Begum and also Maleka Khan as elaborated in previous sections) shared that wartime violence and atrocities were not at all a simple issue because atrocity and violence against women (VAW) was not understood in the developed and comprehensible manner as it is today. Rehabilitation programmes encompassing abortion and adoption of war children were also a ‘historical necessity’. Almost all thought that the rehabilitation process planned during those days was the only way to address the situation. Nobody at that time had actually raised any questions or criticised the process. None of the feminists mentioned above could remember any resistance from any quarter. There was no coercion, except for one or two possibly isolated cases. The rehabilitation centres were for the most part taking care of those who came on their own, responding to the advertisements in the newspaper, or were dropped in by their families. However, the general ethos was to get rid of those babies and the ‘absorption’ of women into the mainstream society, erasing the past for ever.

War babies were unwanted during that time. If we had a more conducive time to welcome and accommodate those babies then we could have thought of keeping them. The decision to push abortion and adoption were responses to the demands of the time and context and the only option available, which was both practical and doable. The people who were involved in the process also held the same opinion. However, one must remember that
there was no coercion on the abortion issue, and the entire situation led to the only available solution (Roushan Jahan, interviewed in June 2011).

The women’s movement also did not see any problem in this.\textsuperscript{37} The rehabilitation centres were largely in the hands of women leaders. Marriage was the only way for these women to be integrated into the larger society. According to the respondents, all of the initiatives were taken or implemented not with any feeling of guilt or failure. Although there was little dispute over abortion and adoption but marrying them off with an exchange of dowry was not at all acceptable to one of the respondent (a leading activist from BMP), even in those days she stood against this paternalistic attitude of the state.

During our discussion with M K Sobhan, Chair, Rehabilitation Board, we were asking him why they are so keen on being the father figure and arranging marriages for them. The answer we received was, ‘Who would take care of these women who have never been out of their homes before, who will take care of these unwanted children?’ We did not have any straight forward answer to this (Maleka Begum, interviewed in July 2010).

One of the feminists from WfW, like most of her contemporaries thought that however undesired, the entire rehabilitation process was the inescapable demand of the time. However, the process had many pitfalls. Many thought that everything was done to clear the ‘dirt’ away and it was all about cleansing the ‘mess’ as if nothing has happened to the women.

\textsuperscript{37} Women like Maleka Khan or Meher Kabir who were involved in the process also thought that this was the only right thing they could do for them.
Failings, Shortcomings, Loopholes: A Critique of the Rehabilitation Process

The second view was of a more radical and critical tone, accusing the rehabilitation process of being insensitive to women. Some thought that the women’s movement to some extent was responsible for the way the issue of VAW and atrocity were treated.

Some (from BMP and from WfW) representing the selected organisations thought that the treatment of the issue of rape and the rehabilitation process was not right and the case was not handled properly. One mentions the situation as of ‘opportunity gone astray’.

….during the entire year of 1972 and beyond, wartime rape could have been our prime area. There was immense scope for us to deal with and dwell on the terms of the rehabilitation process of the rape survivors. We could have changed and challenged the entire mind-set of this patriarchal society of ours. We had ample opportunities to redefine gender, rape, shame, stigma and glory, both individually and organisationally. We have lost a historical moment and instead of unveiling the truth we had stifled it, tried to hide it. Women were the victims of a historical situation, had to pay and suffer in body due to the war but again they became victims of state violence through the patriarchal rehabilitation process of abortion and adoption. We who were involved did not question it, did not make any move to challenge the traditional responses—those who were more matured and senior leaders amongst us did not offer any alternatives to the solution of this rape issue (Ayesha Khanam, interviewed in October 2011).

Mahmuda Islam from the movement representing WfW on the other hand, has a more analytical view regarding the rehabilitation

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38 Ayesha Khanam, President of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, passed away on January 2, 2021. The author deeply mourns the sad demise of a great feminist leader and a participant of this research initiative.
process. She believes that, in the post-war period, the government had taken some steps to tackle the situation and handed over this responsibility to the prominent women leaders. But that does not mean that the women’s voice was clearly articulated on the concerned issues. She recognises this particular role of the women’s movement as “activities of women’s organisations and individuals rather than a concrete feminist articulation under the movement” (Mahmuda Islam, interviewed in March 2011).

Reflectively she observes that, there was ‘participation’, and ‘activities’ undertaken by women activists with passion, compassion and sincerity, but the conscious ‘feminist critique’ was absent—no specific feminist voice was raised to critically analyse the steps taken on behalf of women by the state. The critique and the alternative opinions started to emerge only during the eighties. Rape, atrocities or the idea of domestic violence was not very clear to them then as it is today. Conceptual clarity around women’s issues was at a nascent stage, with a long road yet to be travelled for the women’s movement of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, wartime atrocities and VAW was seen by her as the starting point for the movement and the state.

...However, one has to realise that women’s issues only started to crystallise in Bangladesh, or started to enter into the state discourse through the incidence of wartime atrocity and VAW issues. State responses could be first identified through the rehabilitation centres which gave women leaders ample freedom and autonomy to act upon the issues and concerns via state machinery. These centres were later turned into formal state apparatus dealing with women’s issues. Rape, abortion, adoption of war children, stigma and shame, rejection and desertion, homelessness, dependency on male counterparts and associated vulnerability, widowhood, the huge death toll -- all these issues suddenly came to the forefront that the state had to tackle. The new state had no data on women in hand and WfW also felt that
this should be the starting point to initiate research and create an
information base to fight with, towards making an impact on the
policy discourse. This led to the formation of new kind of
women’s organisations devoted to feminist knowledge production
and policy advocacy (Mahmuda Islam, interviewed in March
2011).

Naripokkho (NP) as an organisation was not present during
the decade of seventies. The pioneers of this organisation were very
young during the war. Responses from two of the leading feminists
reflect yet another level of consciousness which is pertinent to
comprehend the feminist understanding and its time-boundedness.
Both of them felt that war was something nobody could really
escape and they clearly remember being aware of all the political
issues.

While interviewing, one of the founding members of NP, I found
her to be deeply disturbed by the question of rape in 1971.

..it still surprises me when I look back at my own state of apathy
—why did I not think or talk about it. The women there would have
been of my own age but it really bothers me now that I was not
conscious about war time rape at that time. I am indeed deeply
disturbed about my own lack of reactions. I still have no idea
why… (Firdous Azim, interviewed in March 2011).

Shireen Huq from NP remained silent for a while and stated,
“…wish I could avoid talking about this. This is a very sensitive and
emotional issue for me. …”

She thinks if asked the same question at that time she might
have taken up the same position as others did. During that time she
would have answered in favour of adoption and abortion, perhaps
would not have seen anything wrong in giving away unwanted
children for ensuring a stable family life. However, things started to
change for her gradually. The book by Nilima Ibrahim (Ami
Birangona Bolchhi, published in 1998) was a revelation to her and
the word, which always struck her, was izzat (honor), which millions of women have sacrificed during the war. According to this interviewee, the conceptualisation of VAW and atrocity, particularly wartime rape (and rape as such), ambiguity around ‘choice, option’ and ‘coercion’ was never been analysed from a feminist perspective in Bangladesh, not even within the feminist movement. The formulation around rape both by the state apparatus and many others is still highlighted as being loss of izzat -- even after forty years of independence. She feels that this lack of formulation and conceptualisation from feminist perspective is detrimental for the movement.

…For how long will we have to hear this clichéd\(^{39}\) glorification of women sacrificing their izzat for the country’s independence? The sheer callousness hurts me deeply. This attitude, to me couldn’t be more insensitive or cruel towards those who have borne the burden of violence and shame—it exhibits no awareness of the fact that women who have actually suffered do exist but have no claim in this nationalist discourse! These words have become an oft-repeated phrase. It is even more frustrating when these formulations are made not only by the politicians but by the so-called progressive and cultured people as well. (Shireen Huq, interviewed in July 2011).

NP was critical of the responses made by the state and the women’s movement.

“…none of us said, ‘What has happened has happened; now nobody can take away your life!’ Nobody came forward, neither from the state nor from the women’s movement; not then, not even now….. Everyone tried to tackle the problem with the same patriarchal mind-set, tried to sweep it away as soon as possible. There were women in advanced stages of pregnancy and there

\(^{39}\) “tirish lakh shaheed er rokto ar dui lakh narrir izzat/shombrom er binimoye desh shadhin hoyechhe” (The country has been liberated at the cost of the blood of 30 lakh shaheeds and honour of two lakh women,).
were women who did not want to abort but they were not given any ‘real’ options. Whenever I think of it I wonder that crimes had been committed against them by the Pakistani army, but what about the crime we have committed against them?” (Shireen Huq, interviewed in July 2011).

She was aware of the fact that many women wanted to abort their babies because that was what was expected of them, but question of choice, option and decision making capacity were shaped by the larger society, by the broader nationalist discourse. The opposite could also be true, she opined. They could have been given a choice of keeping their babies, for instance, a recognition like Bosnia\textsuperscript{40}. She added that the Bosnian Government has taken an

\textsuperscript{40} During the Bosnian War (1992-1995, and the resulting Bosnian genocide, the violence assumed a gender-targeted form, with the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS) carrying out a policy of genocidal rape against the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) ethnic group.\textsuperscript{[1]} Estimates of the total number of women raped during the war range from 12,000 to 50,000. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) declared that "systematic rape", and "sexual enslavement" in time of war was a crime against humanity, second only to the war crime of genocide. After the rapes occurred, married women were often shunned by their husbands for religious or cultural reasons. However, there was a very strong and unique movement in the region: Imams and other male Muslim community leaders encouraged husbands to set aside religious sentiments regarding raped women and take their wives back and support them more as war survivors than as irrevocably marred. It was rather specific to this conflict that rape was seen as a community problem. In addition, Indira Kajosevic, a Bosnian expert, survivor, and founder of some of the first trauma centres and feminist groups in Bosnia, says that women in the region were able to gain status through organizing in a way that was unique to this conflict. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was the first international tribunal in Europe to convict for rape as a crime against humanity (following Akayesu in Rwanda). According to the ICTY website, it was also “the first international criminal tribunal to enter convictions for rape as a form of torture and for sexual enslavement as crime against humanity” cited by Michele Lent Hirsch published on February 8, 2012, Women Media Centre. See for detail: http://womenundersiege project.org/conflicts/profile/bosnia. Accessed in May 2011.
entirely different position with regard to raped women. They categorically declared that all war babies are Bosnians. Actually these women in 1971 had no power in terms of keeping their children—no scope for this kind of option was present in the popular ethos. The norms and values following the popular attitude and the mind-set in Bangladesh largely shaped the responses of the ‘victims’, the women’s movement and the state.

Both the key figures from NP detailed that the same attitude was only perpetuated later in free independent Bangladesh, where raped women are advised by everyone to abort their babies, or are coerced to marry their rapists because that is the only other solution. To this day we have not been able to offer any space to the raped women and their children, whether the perpetrators are enemies from outside or fellow citizens of this very country. The decision still lies with society and its hegemonic ideology based on ‘chastity’ and legitimacy— says the interviewee.

Years later in independent Bangladesh, I remember a pregnant girl came to Khushi Kabir\(^{41}\) for support and everyone was thinking of how to arrange an abortion for her. She told us ‘All you can do is to advise me how to destroy the baby but can’t you just tell me how I can keep the baby?’ Her words actually made it very clear that our so-called feminism has such limitations! We have failed in 1971 and even today we don’t offer any other options to raped women. I believe the right to abortion is a right with two sides, and should be unconditional; making all the options available to her, in her own terms (Shireen Huq, interviewed in July 2011).

Similar views were shared by Ayesha Khanam from BMP. She thinks that although many family members did not want to disclose the rape and did not want to make any claim for the state

\(^{41}\) NGO activist, *Nijera Kori.*
provided title, it is also true that society has not changed much in the last forty years of independence on the question of rape and the shame associated with it. According to her, rape continued to take place and raped women continued to commit suicide in the free and independent Bangladesh. She could see no fundamental change around the issue of ‘chastity’ for women.

It is extremely difficult for women to stand on their own in our country where women are considered ‘impure’ if she is just touched by other men—‘shatititya’ or ‘chastity’ of a married woman remains crucial and central to women’s identity till today. I think these are the areas where the women’s movement should have–concentrated, where there is still ample scope for work (Ayesha Khanam, interviewed in October 2011).

The above narration not only elaborates the complexity and ambiguity of the wartime rape issue but also connects it with contemporary Bangladesh and challenges our feminist understanding around rape, atrocity and VAW issues. In fact, the entire debate around Birangona remains central to this discussion.

**Birangona: The Juxtaposed Burden**

The consent, consensus and divergence regarding wartime rape, abortion and adoption as discussed above largely reflected the historicity of the issue. Similar arguments and reactions are observed around the state title of Birangona. Almost all agree that the title of Birangona was bestowed upon wartime rape victims by the state with good intentions but failed to bring about the desired outcome beyond mainstream patriarchal framework. It took great effort for a traditional statist discourse to address the rape issue openly. However, the feminists and the leaders of the movement never failed to analyse the situation and the problematic of the title from a feminist perspective located in post-2000 era. They were largely critical of the title, which instead of portraying the women
as valiant warriors of the war, could then be easily used to mark and shun them for being ‘rape victims’. As a result their expected assimilation into society was even more difficult to attain. It was clear from other initiatives that in order to become assimilated as citizens into the new nation they will have to come ‘clean’ and be free from any remnants of the enemy.

According to some of the participants of this research process, the entire logic of the title became problematic as it actually attempted to mask the wartime rape and atrocities by projecting being raped as a contribution to the nation—a great sacrifice. A respondent from BMP thinks that “rape should have been articulated as rape, as a clear act of violation of human rights, not be glorified, nor pushed back under the carpet”. But the reality was not conducive.

I myself, like many others, did not want to be critical of the new state right at that moment on these issues. All I was interested in was to build the organisation--BMP. I believed that we had commonly fought for a new independent state hand in hand. Our feminist voice was rather cautious of destabilising the new government of the time. The main concern was to give some breathing space to the new government and move forward with the broader goals (Maleka Begum, interviewed in March 2010).

However this cautious and restrained approach was not endorsed by all. Another activist again added that instead of silencing, we should have exposed the atrocities committed during the war. Actually the war time rape and atrocity was highlighted in order to get international support, but later in the free independent Bangladesh it was concealed from the society at large. The respondent does not agree that the situation was such that ‘coming out into the public’ for the rape survivors were not a viable option. “The situation and reality is never right, we need to create it in our favour and we have failed to do so”, said Ayesha Khanam.
Firdous Azim from NP elaborated on the issue of rape and *Birangona* yet from a critical standpoint and identified the collective failure of state, society and the women’s movement in addressing the issue. Reiterating the case of Bosnia, NP stressed that a simple declaration from the state has changed the entire scenario of wartime violence from the perspective of gender. While in Bangladesh, the state title of *Birangona* has only isolated the afflicted women. Despite all, almost all the interviewees believe that it is never too late to bring back the issue for reflection rather than forgetting and pushing it back into amnesia and invisibility out of shame.

Figure 3: Students prepare for war, 1970.

Figure 4: Female Muktijoddhas teaching local women to use rifles.


Figure 5: Female protesting for Bangladesh Independence in the Shaheed Minar, Dhaka, 1971.
Protagonists of the movement highlighted yet another pertinent contradiction inherent to the title of *Birangona*. The question of agency of women, it is argued, became cloaked by ‘victimhood’. Apart from being raped, women had also actively participated in the war, sacrificed their lives and directly contributed to the war of independence, but they were not recognised as valiant war heroes/heroines. There were many women who engaged in armed conflict directly in the battlefield, worked in the wartime field hospitals, took risks, managed entire households in the absence of their male counterparts, and offered help to the freedom fighters. To
some of the respondents, all these are a part of the *Muktijuddo*. But their various roles were ignored and forgotten. Through the title, a range of contradictions arose around the issue of women’s role in the WoL, raising a dichotomous question — who are the main agents and who are the victims? (Akhter, 1991).

While talking about this binary representation of women’s agency and victimhood alongside women’s role as ‘*muktijoddha*’, one of the respondents, Ayesha Khanam from BMP identifies the weaknesses and failures of the women’s movement. She thinks that the state and the movement were inadequate in acknowledging the many roles and contributions of women in WoL. Their bravery and sacrifice cannot be compensated only by giving Taramon Bibi the title of ‘*Beer Protik*’ after 24 years of independence. A big research project should have been initiated to establish women’s role and rights in relation to the war alone. Both Mahmuda Islam (WfW) and Ayesha Khanam (BMP) contend that the context of 1971 was entirely an extraordinary one. Apart from wartime rape as a distinct case of atrocity against women, they felt that women’s role in the war was not acknowledged properly. Her right to acknowledgment as participant of the war was denied, her agency was muted.

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42 National Council for Freedom Fighters (*Jatiyo Muktijoddha Council*) during its meeting held on 13th October 2014 has declared the *Birangona* as freedom fighters (*Muktijoddha*). *The Daily Prothom Alo*, editorial, 14.10.2014.

43 Taramon Bibi is one of the two (the other is Sitara Begum) decorated female freedom fighters in Bangladesh who fought for the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Army), the guerrilla force that fought against the Pakistani military in 1971. After the war, she was awarded the *Bir Protik* (Symbol of Valour) by the Bangladesh government. Her whereabouts, however, were unknown and the award was never handed over to her. She herself remained unaware of this until 1995, when a researcher from Mymensingh discovered her. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh finally handed over her award on December 19, 1995.
This entire debate can be concluded perhaps with the words of a respondent from NP. Firdous Azim actually analyses the issue as part of the broader conflict between nationalism and women. Birangona is the most crucial example of this conflict in the context of Bangladesh. The Birangona issue is not yet settled—no solution had been reached on it hitherto. She observes that, there is no list of Birangona till today, nor any list of the children sent abroad for adoption. The history was purposefully erased and evaded in the name of shame, izzat and perceived hatred for enemy children. There is still no space for them to come out and speak. There is very little comprehensive research on wartime rape, abortion and adoption; and the women’s movement has yet to address this issue form a feminist perspective.

Firdous Azim is also concerned about the juxtaposed representation of Birangona and Mohila Muktijodhha (Women Freedom Fighter) in the liberation war discourse. Concern was expressed around the idea of binary representation of victim hood vs. agency. She is not even comfortable with the idea of identifying the figure of Birangona as the freedom fighters who directly participated in war, sacrificing life and limb. On the one hand, Birangonas were not only rape victims but were also part of the Muktijuddho, making sacrifices for their country. Then again it was also necessary to acknowledge that they were not freedom fighters but rape victims as well, who were neither to be seen in the same critical plane as the freedom fighters, nor to be placed on two different poles. This contradiction plays a critical role in the war discourse of Bangladesh.

She is of the opinion that rape should be taken as a war crime but is apprehensive about how far the present war crime tribunals might be able to address the rape issue, a concern which stems from

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44 War crime tribunal is working on the issue under the Awami League government led by the current Prime minister Sheikh Hasina since 2010.
awareness of this lack of clarity of understanding as a whole. The inherent problematic of the rape issue in the context of Bangladesh may lead to nothing as there is little surviving evidence of rape.

In fact these oppositional and ambiguous notions overarch the portrayal of women’s role in 1971 war narratives. The national discourse had little idea about how they would like to project women, or what the construction of women ought to be even during the 1969-70 non-cooperation movement against Pakistani rule. Women were mobilising, participating in militant activities on the streets, undergoing training and conducting march-pasts with dummy rifles, and taking first aid training etc. Essentially, the women’s movement at that time was preparing to be a part of the war along with the entire nation. Changes were taking place—older traditional notions were being challenged, boundaries were overstepped but all this was happening without any conscious awareness, without any clear conception on part of the state about how they perceive women. The women before, during and after the war were a vague, undefined and unresolved figure, which is becoming increasingly problematic, even today.

Perhaps it is very difficult to reach a consensus or have a solution to the representation of women in war because of the inherent conflict between woman and nation (Firdous Azim, interviewed in March 2011).

Women’s role in 1971 continues to be an unresolved issue and perhaps will remain an arena of debate and dilemma for years to come. She believes that the women’s movement has to resolve and accommodate the layers of representation of women within the broader frame work of the nationalist discourse.
VI
Conclusion

While wrapping up it was revealed that the difference in views and critiques around the entire length of the rehabilitation process may be largely ascribed to the phenomenon of generation gap. Wartime atrocity and the rehabilitation process by the state were the first entry point for the women’s movement in the new Bangladesh. The nationalist movement and the women’s movement were largely in tune with their broader goals and objectives. During those early days of the seventies, the first generation involved in the women’s movement was maintaining a relationship of a mellowed allegiance with the state. Moreover, there was no direct lack of agreement between the state and the women’s movement with regard to the rehabilitation process for the war victims. The rehabilitation process was designed by and entrusted upon the women leaders and key persons of that time. A section of the respondents belonged to the first generation of feminists who had been an integral part of the process. They had to respond to the situation at hand and act accordingly. They agreed that whatever steps were taken in terms of abortion, adoption and state title, emerged from the historical necessity of the time. Furthermore, apart from being in an emerging stage, feminist critiques and challenges remained in low key considering the very situation around the new state and nation building process.

On the other hand, later generations were deprived of the chance to participate in critical decision-making process during the time under discussion. They posed a more ‘radical’ position in relation to the state and the women’s movement. When they started to look at the issue retrospectively, they invariably enjoyed the comparative advantage of time. They had the opportunity to offer alternative perspectives, after looking at similar cases, which had by this time taken place in other places. All these alternative
possibilities might be theoretically and conceptually more appropriate for women of 1971 in Bangladesh, but were actually very difficult to apply at the prevailing time. Decisions and responses usually remain time bound, moulded by the particular necessity of the time and context. In the long run, the responses analysed by the ones who were active participants in the rehabilitation process and of the newer generation have only enriched the conceptual understanding of wartime rape, atrocity and VAW issues, revealing multi-layered realities of feminist formulations (Banu, 2002).

If analysed from the organisational position it is visible that pioneer organisations like WfW and BMP are less critical of the state’s role during the early seventies. They are found to have been more cautious with regard to the new state, as they did not want to subvert their positions and hard earned achievements. They wanted to work together with the state, include men and other power structures, bringing everyone on the same platform. They were carefully strategizing their movement, an act that can be labelled as ‘loyal opposition’ to the mainstream politics, using every possible source to influence the state on women’s issues. During those early years of independence they were sometimes critical of the state, resisting but also trying to maintain alliances with the mainstream politics. The women’s movement was aware of the limitation of the rehabilitation programme but as part of their patriarchal bargain it remained accommodating and not to challenge the new state. NP (which came into the scene a decade later), on the other hand, is constantly deconstructing and challenging the mainstream, bringing up new issues and new lenses to examine and scrutinise, largely enjoying the opportunity of not having been part of the process at that time. As delineated, the debates around the issue of rape victims, Birangona, Muktijodhha, and war babies thus remain unresolved and continue to emerge and remerge in our national discourse. However, according to Najma Chowdhury:
......in final consideration, the rehabilitation activities were part of the unavoidable responsibility, which the women leaders had to abide by under the circumstances. Feminist formulations cannot be put into a strait jacket, feminism is flexible and feminist articulations are varied, complex and even contradictory when analysed in hindsight, thus on many occasions it has to be understood as a contextualised reaction (Najma Chowdhury, interviewed in June 2011).

I will end here with an illuminating note from Maleka Khan, from BWRB, 1972, who still has contact with some of the rape survivors on personal capacity. She shared (2010) that, some are ready to bring the issue to the courts. They believe that they are ‘ready’ in the sense, they are now at a certain age and their children are all grown up; and they feel that ‘now’ they can open up about the rape incidents, provided it is taken seriously by the state and a proper judgment is ensured.
References

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Annexure 1

Profiles of the selected respondents
(Arranged alphabetically by first name)

Ayesha Khanam
Firdous Azim
Mahmuda Islam
Maleka Khan
Maleka Begum
Najma Chowdhury
Roushan Jahan
Shireen Huq

Personal Profile: Ayesha Khanam

Ayesha Khanam, the present president of the central committee of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad has been a women’s rights activist since 1972, working with women's and progressive secular democratic movements. As a student, she led student’s movements between 1965 and 1971; and acted as the Vice President of Central Committee of Progressive Students Organisation (alligned with Communist Party of Bangladesh) as well as the Vice President and General Secretary of Rokeya Hall Students Union, Dhaka University. She was also affiliated with the left Progressive Political Party, playing active roles in the anti-military and anti-autocracy movements for establishing democracy and a non-communal government and society. She was a freedom fighter in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

After independence, she joined women’s human rights movements and started working with Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) in 1972. Since then, she has occupied positions like the organising secretary for 12 years, General Secretary for more than
eight years and presently the president of BMP for the last twelve years.

In addition, Ayesha Khanam was actively involved in the ratification and implementation of CEDAW and South Asian Women Caucus and has been playing a special role in Law Reform Movement since 1990. She is also a member of the Preparatory Committee in Bangladesh for the 50th Anniversary celebration of UN Declaration on Fundamental Human Rights.

Being an active member of women's movements, Ayesha Khanam has provided relentless effort for building up a united, broad based, strong and vibrant women's human rights movement in Bangladesh. Her writings on women’s issues have been published in several periodicals, journals and daily newspapers. As a believer of secularism, democracy, human ideology and culture, she has always remained vocal in the civil society movement. She’s been acting as one of the central organisers of these activities, being an advocacy and lobby agent for promoting women’s Human Rights in Bangladesh. She’s been closely connected with UNIFEM and UNESCAP sponsored activities associated with IWRAW Asia-Pacific as well.

Another sector in which Ayesha Khanam has been involved closely is the Post-Beijing activities and the non-government processes of the implementation of Beijing+5 and Beijing+10 declarations and their Platform for Action plan. She is a key participant of the Beijing+10 Process, Implementation & Monitoring Process in Bangladesh and in the region and works through organizing active networks.

Being a part of numerous regional and international conferences related to all her activities and involvements, Ayesha Khanam has acquired a holistic perception of these issues and has
been successful in applying and monitoring them in the context of Bangladesh. She has achieved the position of one of the key leaders of women’s issues and human rights movement in Bangladesh today. She passed away on January 2, 2021.

**Personal Profile: Firdous Azim**

Firdous Azim is a Professor of English and chair of the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University, as well as a member of Naripokkho, a woman’s activist group in Bangladesh. She also worked as a faculty in the Department of English, University of Dhaka. She was the convener of Naripokkho, from 1992-1994, a voluntary post, coordinating all of the organization’s activities, which covers four fields – Women’s Human Rights, Health and Reproduction, Violence against Women and Media and Cultural Representations.

She has published both in the fields of post-colonialism and literature and feminist issues. Her books include *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (Routledge, 1993) and *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature* (University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1996). As a contributing editor for *Feminist Review*, she has edited a special issue entitled *South Asian Feminisms: Negotiating New Terrains*. (March 2009). She was the editor of a special issue for the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal entitled *Complex Terrains: Islam, culture and women in Asia* (June 2011). She was the core research team member for the research on “Pathways of Women’s Empowerment”, for the South Asian regional research programme (2006-2011). She participated in the *Feminist Review* panel presentation with a paper on “Feminist Movements in Bangladesh” in 2004. Her current work researches the cultural history of women in Bangladesh.
Personal Profile: Mahmuda Islam

Mahmuda Islam, is an educationist, researcher and activist of women’s movement in Bangladesh. She started her career at the Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka and served as different capacity from lecturer to professor. She worked as Professor at the Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. Besides, she was a visiting professor; Southern Ilion University, USA. Since spring 2013 Professor Islam has been teaching women and gender studies as part time faculty at the University of Massachusetts Boston, USA. She provided training on gender and development issues in Bangladesh and abroad as gender expert. During last four decades Mahmuda Islam conducted research on wide range of societal, sociological, anthropological and cultural issues and concerns in specific reference to Bangladesh within broader context of South Asian region.

Prof. Islam got her PhD degree on Cultural Values, Beliefs and Practices about Reproductive Health in Rural Bangladesh. Her several writings including Nritotter Shohoj Path, Shomaj o Dhormo, Shamajik Itihashe Potobhumika, Naribadi Chinta o Nari Jobon, Nari Itihashe Upekhipita are being used as academic selected readings in the different universities. She has more than thirty publications that include articles, books and essays in English which have been published in Bangladesh and several countries including USA, Japan, India, Nepal.

As a prominent activist Prof. Islam is actively associated with women’s movement locally and globally. She is member of various national and international organisations, women’s and human rights organisation. She was the President of Women for Women, founder chair of South Asian Association for Women’s Studies, steering committee member of SAARC NGO Women for Peace, South Asia Women Watch, Asia Pacific Women Watch,
member Independent Commission on AIDS in Asia, expert UNDP Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Technical Committee, member South Asia Campaign for Gender Equality. Mahmuda Islam was an active member of the Core Group formed by the Government to prepare Bangladesh National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women: Implementation of Beijing Platform for Action.

As feminist researcher Dr Islam involved herself with women’s and human rights activism towards bridging the gaps between academics and activists. She played an active role in realising the demand for establishment of the Department of Women and Gender Studies in the University of Dhaka.

Professor Islam travelled extensively throughout the world to attend seminars, conferences and policy dialogues as participant, session chair, resource person, and guest of honor.

**Personal Profile: Maleka Khan**

Maleka Khan is best known for her contribution in the rehabilitation of the war victims of 1971. She was then the General Secretary of ‘Bangladesh Girls’ Guide Association’ and later took the position of the Director of ‘Women’s Rehabilitation Foundation’ in 1972 established under the ‘Ministry of Women’s Affair’ to ensure the development of the female victims of war. She was very closely related to those victims and used craft as therapy method to improve their mental as well as their economic state. She took initiatives to establish Sonargaon Craft Village and worked closely with *Shilpajarchya* Zainul Abedin.

Maleka Khan has greatly contributed in preserving the crafts and its history of Bangladesh. She was associated with ‘The
Handcrafts Manufacturer and Exporters Association – BANGLACRAFT’ and ‘Bangladesh Folk Arts and Craft Foundation’ from the beginning of their journey. She also wrote books like ‘Jamdani’ and ‘Nakshi Kantha’ to spread the history among the mass people both nationally and internationally. She has also shared her experience of 1971 in writings like ‘Story of Two Women Survivors of Rape in 1971’.

She had completed her BA and MA degree in ‘Social Welfare’. She was also the Vice-President of ‘Jatiya Mahila Sangstha’ from 1978-80; 1980-82. She was awarded ‘Ananya Shirsha Dosh Award’ and ‘Precious Crown Apricot by the Government of Japan’ for her work on ekebana.

**Personal Profile: Maleka Begum**

Maleka Begum is a women's rights activist and gender practitioner with academic & field-work experience in teaching and research. Currently she is the Chairperson of the Department of Sociology and Gender Studies of Central Women's University, which she joined in 2011 as Professor. Besides, she is also teaching at the Department of Women and Gender Studies of Dhaka University as a part time faculty since 2010. Between 2008 and 2010, she taught at the same department of Dhaka University as a fulltime faculty (project). Besides her teaching skill, she is an established thinker and writer, with a doctorate in Bengali Literature from the University of Dhaka in 2004. She completed her Post Doctorate from Women Studies Research Center, Calcutta University in 2009. She was an External Examiner for Ph.D at Bwardhaman University, India in 2007.

Her publications include books and scholarly articles, some of which are already being used as reference materials at university level. Among others her distinguished books include *Narir Katha* (2012, Oitijjhya, Dhaka), *Rabindra Nather Golpe Jautuk Proshango*

Her ongoing (2012 - till date) research is 'Bangladesher Gonoandolone Narir Bhumika: 1947-1990' which is being supervised by Emeritus Professor Anisuzzaman, Emeritus Professor Najma Chowdhury and Professor Muntasir Mamun, Department of History, University of Dhaka.

From 1960 to till 2014, articles came out in various national & international dailies and magazines including but not limited to Begum, Ittefaq, Sangbad, Ekota, Bhorer Bagoj, Janokantha, Bangla Academy Potrika, Gonoshkhorata Magazine, Unnayan Podokhep (Step towards, Development), Nari Pragati, Itihash Parishad Magazine, Anannya, Jigasha (Kolkata), Prothom Alo, Protichinta, Shachitra Sandhani and Kali O Kalam.

Her direct association with Bangladesh women's rights movement has been appreciated at national and International arena. Her scholarly interest ranges widely from Bengali literature to women's legal and political rights movement and feminism. Besides, she attended a number of conferences and seminars both home and abroad including the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China in 1995, conferences arranged by Women International Democratic Federation in various countries, Conference on Women's Commission of United Nations, New York etc. She is the life member of Bangladesh Asiatic Society, Bangla Academy (Bangladesh), Bongio Shahitto Parishad (Kolkata, India)
and Paschimbango Ittihas Samshad (Kolkata). She had been the General Secretary of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad for 22 years (1970-1992).

She was awarded 'Ananna Shahitta Puroskar 2012'.

**Personal Profile: Najma Chowdhury**

Najma Chowdhury, Emeritus Professor, is the founder Chair of the Department of Women and Gender Studies Department (initially known as the Department of Women’s Studies) in Dhaka University. She has been closely associated with the academic and institutional developments of the Department. Najma completed her graduation and post-graduation degrees from the Department of Political Science, Dhaka University. She joined the Department as a lecturer in 1962. In 1972, she received her Ph.D. degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University.

Her research looks at political and legislative processes in which women participate, and focuses on different facets of women’s political engagement in a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh. Her writings have appeared as chapters and articles in books and journals at home and abroad. With Professor Barbara J. Nelson, she has co-edited a 43-country study entitled Women and Politics Worldwide which was published by Yale University Press. *Of Mangroves and Monsters: Women’s Political Participation and Women’s Studies in Bangladesh* published by University of Dhaka and Pathak Shamabesh, 2010 is another remarkable contribution in academia. She is also editor of *Protesting Patriarchy: Contextualising Rokeya and Protiboondhokotar Protibade: Banglesher Nari O Rokeya’r Dorshon* (Bangla), collections of Rokeya Memorial lectures delivered on occasion of Rokeya day organized since 2004 by the Department of Women and Gender Studies.
Najma Chowdhury received the 'Ekushey Padak' for her outstanding contribution to research in 2008. She was also awarded the “Special Honorary Award” by the Department of Women and Gender Studies of Dhaka University in 2008 for her contribution to the institutionalisation of gender and women education in the country. She also held the UGC Rokeya Chair in 2007-09. She served the Caretaker Government of 1996 as a member of Council of Advisors and held the portfolios of the Ministries of Women and Children Affairs, Social Welfare, and Labour and Manpower. Alongside her professional career, she was widely engaged with global feminism, with other international organisations and UN bodies representing the government of Bangladesh. She served as the President of Women for Women, an advocacy group, that highlights women’s issues through research, publication and lobbying. She was Chair of the largest coalition of NGOs in Bangladesh that carried out extensive country-wide mobilisation in preparation for the Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995.

**Personal Profile: Roushan Jahan**

A literary scholar, feminist researcher, and activist, Roushan Jahan graduated from the Universities of Dhaka and University of Chicago. She taught English at the University of Dhaka before leaving academia. She soon got engaged in founding Women for Women, the first autonomous women's research and advocacy organisation in Bangladesh in 1973. Since then, she has been involved in research on women and development. Her areas of specialisation are literacy and education, employment, health and population, violence against women, and cross-cultural studies. During the last two decades she has acted as a consultant to the Government of Bangladesh and various regional and international bodies, including UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, APDC, SAARC secretariat, ASPBAE to help prepare national policies and regional strategies in the areas of her specialisation. Roushan Jahan has also
represented Bangladesh and presented country reports in many regional and international fora, including UN Women's Conferences in Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). As a Vice-President of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the largest women's activist organisation in the country, and an active member of APWLD and DAWN, two international women's networks, she has been a part of the dynamic and international women's movement during the last two decades. She was also involved with Naripokkho.


**Personal Profile: Shireen Huq**

A women's rights activist working on gender, human rights and development, is a founder Shireen member of Naripokkho and has been a long-time advisor to DANIDA in Bangladesh (1987-2001 and 2003-2006). She is an active member of the International Women's Rights Action Watch/Asia Pacific where she serves on its International Advisory Committee and as a member of the international training team.

During her tenure in DANIDA she was responsible for the design and implementation of a Joint Institutional Review on the Government of Bangladesh's WID Capability as well as in the development of the National Action Plan for the Implementation of
the Beijing Platform for Action. She subsequently led the formulation of the Government of Bangladesh’s Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women which involves an integrated response by several ministries/agencies to women who have been subjected to violence. This involved the design of a framework of inter-ministerial and inter-agency cooperation to provide one stop services for violence survivors (medical treatment, psychological counselling, police assistance in the filing of criminal complaints, the conduct of medico-legal examinations, legal assistance and referral services for shelter, etc) as well as the development of individual components aimed at improving investigation, evidence collection and prosecution of VAW cases. The first DNA Profiling Laboratory in the country was set up under this initiative.

One of her responsibilities as Deputy Coordinator of the Danida Human Rights and Good Governance Programme was the development, monitoring and quality assurance of a programme portfolio on Women and Access to Justice. Addressing Violence against Women was treated as a sub-component under Access to Justice with a focus on meeting state obligations. This portfolio included support for non-government organisations working on a variety of interventions addressing prevention of VAW and survivor support.

Shireen has worked on a voluntary basis in Naripokkho’s advocacy and campaign work. This has included the development of position papers, protest activities, lobby work and public awareness campaigns on a range of issues including violence against women and human rights. On behalf of International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific she has conducted training on CEDAW and facilitated consultations on the CEDAW Committee’s Concluding Observations in different parts of the world. Shireen was educated at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh, The Evergreen State College in the USA and the University of Sussex in UK.
Annexure 2

Profiles of the selected organisations
(Arranged according to the year of establishment)

Profile of the Organization: Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP)

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (BMP) is a voluntary, national action oriented mass women’s organisation working since 4th April 1970. It was launched under the leadership of Poet Sufia Kamal, the competent successor of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, pioneer visionary of women’s emancipation of the sub-continent. BMP, apart from working for women, was found to be engaged in both wider nationalist issues as well. The organisation has been in Bangladesh on voluntary basis for more than four decades and pioneering the women’s movement with slogan ‘Women’s Rights are Human Rights’. For gender equality BMP focuses on activity concerning empowerment of women by enjoying their equal rights & dignity in the family, society and state. BMP is ground-breaking the movement of resisting violence against women, ensuring political empowerment and establishment of Constitutional rights of women since inception. It is working in the light of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC), Human Rights Declaration, Cairo Declaration and Beijing Platform for action (BPFA). Besides gender issue BMP also laid emphasis on promoting peace and democracy to establish equity based society having good governance.

BMP is a membership-based organisation. It has more than 0.135 million general members. It operates in 61 District branches within the country in around 2278 local units at grassroots level. Women aged 16 years or above belonging to any status, occupation,
religion, having commitment to women’s emancipation and committed to abide by the constitution of the organisation are eligible for membership. Apart from working around VAW issues, the objectives of BMP includes mainstreaming of women in development and policies, establishing itself as a lobby and advocacy agent, ensure sustainability of the organisation, to establish equity based society for man and women.

The following are the major activities that are conducted by 12 units of program of BMP:

1. Policy Intervention for mainstreaming women in national development process; equal & effective sharing of power by women for governing the state
2. Advocacy for one third number of reserved seats for women in the parliament & Introduce direct election
3. Advocacy and lobby to create enable environment for political empowerment & increase women’s participation in politics
4. Promote women in electoral politics as political force for establishing a democratic, secular & equity based state; build up movement to resist VAW
5. Extended social and legal support for victim of violence
6. Policy intervention for equal legal status and rights in personal & public sphere
7. Advocacy for Law reform and Uniform Family Code (UFC)
8. Render support services such as safe shelter for victim of violence, medicare, rehabilitation, relief distribution in nation clarity
9. Inclusion of men in women’s movement; capacity building of members as women human rights activist
10. Motivation to keep upholds the spirit of voluntarism & commitment to women’s human rights
11. Building financial management capacity for institution of the organization
12. Gender and human rights awareness program for professionals, civil society and community people
13. Address the issue of young women and adopt plan of action
14. Effort to unite indigenous women movement in mainstream women movement and adopt plan of action to address their problem

Profile of the Organization: Women for Women (WfW)

One of the most important women's groups in Bangladesh is Women for Women: A Research and Study Group, located in Dhaka. It is a pioneer non-government, non-profit, voluntary women's organisation, engaged in research and public education programs on gender issues with a view to enhancing the status of women. It was established in 1973 by a group of committed woman professionals, representing a variety of academic disciplines. Women’s movement was taken another shift in the arena of academia with the emergence of this organisation. The Group strongly felt the need for developing a sound information base for identifying the issues relating to the disadvantaged status of women in Bangladesh and for creating public awareness with a view to ameliorating the existing situation. Since then, Women for Women has been engaged in research, information, dissemination, advocacy awareness and motivational programs.

The objectives of Women for Women are:

1. To create awareness among people of Bangladesh, particularly policy planners and public functionaries, about the need for enhancing women's status and moulding public opinion for action against the oppression and exploitation of women.
2. To organise, undertake and promote research and study in all areas of women's life in general, and to focus on the specific
problems impeding their integration in development efforts in particular, keeping in view the national priorities.

3. To be a forum for effective advocacy for gender equity through dissemination of policy-oriented research findings concerning women through publications, research, seminars and exchange forums.

4. To inform and educate a wider audience about critical issues, current concerns and to promote interaction through publications and national conventions.

5. To establish and develop linkages and networking with similar groups at home and abroad.

6. To create and develop gender-sensitivity among planners, public functionaries, development agency personnel and program implementors through relevant gender training programs.

7. To extend cooperation and consultancy services to the government as well as to other national and international agencies involved in the area of women and development.

The activities of Women for Women include organising seminars, training, workshops, conferences, national conventions, library development, and publications.

Profile of the Organization: Naripokkho (NP)

Naripokkho is a membership based women activist organization, which has a strong focus on access to justice for women and children who have suffered violence. Naripokkho's research work on VAW includes a pilot study on VAW conducted in 1995, and the Bangladesh component of the WHO multi-country study, published in 2005. These were major undertakings that involved training and managing a large team of data collectors and interviewers handling a large sample of respondents for the survey and a smaller sample of case studies and life histories using open-ended interview guidelines. The Rapid assessment study on VAW was conducted on
a smaller scale using qualitative tools for in-depth information and case studies; which was a base paper for the government Multispectral Programme of Violence against women, which Naripokkho helped conceptualise and lobby to establish. In 2001, Naripokkho established a help line aimed at supporting women in violent situations. At the same time, a center-based psychosocial team was developed by Naripokkho to assist in the recovery of women and children affected by sexual abuse. The team works in conjunction with the advocacy and activist side of the organization. It comprised of trainee psychologists from the Clinical Psychology Department, University of Dhaka. It is reported that 70% of their clients were adult survivors of sexual abuse. It was unable to continue the service then due to lack of funds.

Naripokkho implemented an action research project from 1998, which is still ongoing, monitoring accountability of state interventions to cases of violence against women. The focus of the project was to ensure access to justice to women who had suffered violence, through monitoring government facilities especially court, law enforcement agency and hospitals. Through this project Naripokkho able to review Women and children prevention act 2000, review Medico-legal procedures and systems and contribute to reform policy and implementation processes. The project also helped further develop grassroots women organizations to enable them to monitor district level government departments who are working for protection and prevention on violence against women. In addition to that several documents were developed for Govt. officials. These include training materials to be part of police training modules for interpersonal communication skill development, basic communication, medico-legal process kits, address book for survivors, hospital monitoring guideline etc. Naripokkho also recently finished an in depth in-depth study of Male perpetrators of VAW, which targeted a small purposive sample of men convicted for committing VAW and self-identified
persons who have committed domestic violence. A confidence building workshop module was developed for survivors of violence, and a workshop was conducted on selected 10 district locations through partner NGOs. Under this workshop survivors were given tools to become emotionally stronger and taught coping mechanisms. Finally, Naripokkho plays a pioneer role in implementing VAW related programmes through ‘Doorbar Network’, a network of women's organizations covering all 64 districts of Bangladesh through 535 members. Recently Naripokkho has received a grant to bring about awareness of VAW in communities, through mono-drama monologues, whereby women’s stories are performed in front of audiences to sensitise them to the issues by seeing a human face through theatre.

Primary sources of information include information collected from monitoring of cases of VAW - from courts, police stations and hospitals, as well as communications from women subjected to VAW in the community, who are in touch with any one of 535 Doorbar member organizations throughout Bangladesh. Based on this information Naripokkho is trying to bring about an accountability process with the government relevant departments, by identifying and sharing service laps and gaps in accessing service
CGS-Square Fellowship
An Initiative for developing the liberal future

Square today symbolized a name - a state of mind in the business world. From its inception in 1958, Square has today burgeoned into one of the topmost conglomerates in Bangladesh. Square started out as a small-scale pharmaceutical venture in 1958. By its fourth year square turned into a profit-making organization. During last 5 decades, Square has become pioneer in diversified fields of business starting from pharmaceuticals to healthcare, Textiles to Readymate Garments, Toiletries to Consumer Goods Information & Communication technology to media. Its present unassailable status is the outcome of its successful diversification. The relentless pursuit for excellence; the urge to never stand still, to never slow down and to never stop thinking, Square looks at the future with increasing confidence. Square intends not only to strengthen its strong local footings but also extend its global presence.

Square’s activity goes well beyond adhering to a business. As a socially conscious and responsible corporate body, Square is committed to the improvement of the society as a whole. Wellbeing of consumer, employee and society are the three foundation pillars of the values and principles of Square. To set an example worth emulating in the worldwide prevention of genocide, University of Dhaka Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS) and Square Toiletries jointly arranged a 3-year long Fellowship Program “CGS-Square Fellowship 2015-2017 to create awareness about this global phenomenon. Patronizing issues of the own boundary is one of the major activities that Square are willingly doing every day. Thus, we are keeping our foothold is not only cultural, recreational or sports rather issues like genocide that are quite important for showcasing the long history of our country thus widen our scope of understanding for the liberal future.

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